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16 May 1984

MEMORANDUM FOR: Director of Central Intelligence  
Deputy Director of Central Intelligence

FROM: SA/DCI/IA

SUBJECT: NFIB Meeting, 18 May 1984

1. You are scheduled to attend an NFIB meeting, Friday, 18 May at 1400 hours. There is only one item on Friday's agenda and that is the SNIE entitled "Recent Soviet Military-Political Activities". The responsible NIO is Fritz Ermarth.

2. This SNIE examines recent Soviet activities of a wide variety (exercises, Berlin actions, war-scare propaganda) and concludes that they do not represent a coherent tactical pattern, do not display a genuine Soviet fear of imminent attack, and do not conceal preparations for near-term aggressive action. They do, however, occur against a background of deepening Soviet anxiety about intensification of the long-term competition.

3. At TAB A are your talking points prepared by Fritz. These allow you to signal your approval of the estimate and at the same time permit you to open the session for a broader discussion of possible Soviet behavior in the future. In particular, Fritz suggests that you raise the possibility that Soviet efforts to discredit the Reagan Administration could lead the Kremlin to undertake initiatives that carry the risk of confrontation. (This could be on the order of, for example, the prospective fall offensive by the Salvadoran guerrillas.) Second, your talking points also raise the specter of a weak Soviet leadership that is unable to handle domestic and foreign political concerns and so might stumble into ill considered actions that are unintentionally dangerous. Such a discussion could serve to better inform and guide analysts around the Community and in Fritz's view, would be helpful in foreshadowing a SNIE on near-term Soviet policy toward the US. The intention is not to spur major changes in the SNIE that is under consideration, which appears to be in good shape.

4. At TAB B is a background memo prepared by Fritz that elaborates on your talking points. At TAB C is a copy of the SNIE. And finally, at TAB D are some last minute changes proposed by Navy and DIA. (I have already annotated your copy of the SNIE so as to include these changes.)

5. If I can do more to help in your preparation for this meeting, please call.

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DCI Talking Points: "Recent Soviet-Military Political Activities"

This SNIE resulted from concern during the last few months that unusually large Soviet military exercises, actions in Berlin, and war-scare propaganda might constitute a pattern that was aimed at intimidating the US, or that conveyed an unusual degree of fear of attack or perhaps preparation for some aggressive action by the Soviets.

The SNIE concludes, on the basis of force status and diplomatic contacts, that the Soviets are neither genuinely afraid of an imminent attack nor are they preparing for some imminent action that runs a high risk of confrontation with the US.

Most of the Soviet actions have their own rationales, Soviet military exercises are shaped by long-term force development plans, and all Soviet behavior is colored to some extent by the view of the Soviets that the US is presenting them with serious new challenges. The activities examined do not, however, represent a totally planned response to that challenge in the short-term or tactical sense. The Soviets are, rather, looking ahead with some anxiety to intensified longer-term strategic competition.

I believe these judgments are sound as far as they go.

But I wonder whether we show a tendency to understate two potential dangers:

a. First, the desire of the Soviets to discredit the policies of the US in the short term, and perhaps to contribute to domestic political opposition, might spur them to take some initiative that could lead to confrontation, e.g., in Central America, against Pakistan, or perhaps in the context of the Sino-Vietnamese conflict.

b. Second, the Soviet leadership appears weak, unable to come to grips with its domestic and foreign problems effectively, and perhaps prone to ill-considered actions that are unintentionally dangerous.

I would welcome your thoughts on these points because we shall have in the next six weeks or so to do a SNIE on near-term Soviet policy toward the US.

A few procedural points:

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The Director of Central Intelligence

Washington, D.C. 20505

National Intelligence Council

NIC #02886-84  
15 May 1984

MEMORANDUM FOR: Director of Central Intelligence  
Deputy Director of Central Intelligence

THROUGH: Vice Chairman, National Intelligence Council  
Chairman, National Intelligence Council

FROM: Fritz W. Ermarth  
National Intelligence Officer for USSR-EE

SUBJECT: SNIE on "Recent Soviet Military-Political Activities"  
for NFIB on 18 May 1984 (Talking Points at Tab B)

1. This SNIE has been coordinated by all involved NFIB agencies (CIA, State/INR, DIA, NSA, Army, Navy, Air Force) and is ready for consideration by NFIB.

- It is suitable for approval, with the proviso that some minor word changes (e.g., to assure consistency between text and summary) are made in a clean up session of reps.
- Under the rules formal NFIB consideration automatically upgrades what started as an IIM to the status of a SNIE.
- At present DIA has three reserves relating to how the US-Soviet competition is characterized and to problems in the Soviet leadership. We expect their final position on Friday AM.

2. The SNIE does well what it was tasked to do: to examine a disparate array of Soviet activities, which alarmed us by their coincidence in March and April, for indicators of unusual Soviet fear of imminent attack by the US or of Soviet intent to take aggressive action themselves.

- It concludes that the activities involved do not constitute a tactically coherent pattern intended to intimidate, do not display real fear of attack at the leadership level, and do not conceal an intent to launch an unusually confrontational action in the immediate future.

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3. I have reservations about the way the SNIE handles certain topics that really go beyond the scope of the study, but inevitably constitute part of its larger context. These concern the perceptions, mind-set, and decisionmaking of the Soviet leadership as it tries to find a policy line that can blunt or reverse the long-term challenge of the current US administration. In my view, there is a danger that the paper understates two important themes:

a. The strong desire of the Soviets to find a workable anti-US line, beyond their generally ineffective propaganda about the threat of war, could lead them to take new initiatives that heighten the risk of direct confrontation (beyond what we are pretty sure they'll try anyway, i.e., a "Tet" in El Salvador).

b. The weakness of Chernenko and the personal deficiencies of the other members of the Politburo old guard may have created an unusual and potentially dangerous situation in the Soviet leadership. The political insecurity of some leaders may have created a situation in which policy lines that sound "macho" are uncritically adopted, and in which tactical inflexibility combines with a tendency to "spastic" or uncoordinated Soviet actions.

4. Neither of these themes spring vividly from the activities we examined, nor are they strongly supported by other hard data. Yet I infer from the total atmosphere of Soviet propaganda and behavior that they are more strongly present than we admit.

- Moreover, since the SNIE was completed a few (admittedly arguable) tidbits of reporting suggest that the Soviet foreign policy establishment is both undisciplined and unsure of itself because the helm is in weak hands.
- Unfortunately, the interagency estimates process is not at all skilled in dealing with this kind of thing because, despite the availability of footnotes and dissents, there is a strong tendency to least-common-denominator judgments.
- Furthermore, several agencies resist such notions as factionalism in the Soviet leadership and the possibility of a stronger military role, issues on which we ought especially now to be open minded.

5. I believe it would be constructive for you to discuss with the NFIB principals whether, beyond the specifics of this SNIE, we may be understating the dangers and unpredictability of the current Soviet political outlook (talking points below).

- We should avoid any substantial changes to the SNIE, other than appending some collection guidance to reflect concerns about Soviet risk taking and leadership decisionmaking. Rather the discussion should foreshadow another SNIE on Soviet near-term policy toward the US.

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Fritz W. Ermarth

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